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David Hidalgo may have said it best: "Every once in a while, God will send you a good batch of songs."

Steve Ferguson, *Jack Salmon and Derby Sauce* (Schoolkids) was a triumphant re-emergence of a rock & roll master. The co-founder of NRBQ's melodic, chicken-pickin' guitar remains instantly identifiable and nearly impossible to imitate. Teaming up with a rambunctious horn section, Ferguson wrote tunes that will easily stand the test of time and repeated listenings.

Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, *Mbaqanga* (Verve/World). Finally, a new release from the lion and lionesses of Soweto.

The King All-Stars (After Hours). A reunion of King Records alumni, and what a reunion it was. The players included Bill Doggett, Hank Ballard, Fred Wesley and Bootsy Collins.

The Red Devils, *King King* (Def American). The blues record of the year.

Owing as much to Can as to Sonic Youth, New York's **Drunken Boat live** was like walking into a wind tunnel of sound: a driving, droning assault that nailed you to your seat. *See Ruby Falls*, DB's latest, is on First Warning/BMG.

Originally from New York City, **Mommyheads** recently relocated to San Francisco. The guys were young, from 21 to 28, but played with the taste and restraint of seasoned pros who understand (and use) dynamics in ways that most bands never even comprehend. Their show was full of wonderful tunes that were smart but not smart-ass, carefully constructed and meticulously performed — imagine They Might Be Giants minus the pretensions, a less ponderous XTC played by guys with a lust for space music, extended jams and wigged-out instrumentals. The band's new release, aptly titled *Coming Into Beauty*, is available from Simple Machine Records, P.O. Box 10290, Arlington, VA 22210-1290.

Reissues and collections made up some of the year's most important releases. The best included **Rhino**'s ambitious **collaboration with Atlantic Records**, Rykodisc's four-disc **Nick Drake** set and RCA's consummate **Elvis** box. Smaller retrospectives like Mercury's **Left Banke** disc and Capricorn's **Elmore James** set were also noteworthy. For youngsters, the sets served as important digital links to the past. For oldsters, it was déjà vu.

Other favorite releases: **Kingmaker**, *Eat Yourself* (Chrysalis); **Catherine Wheel**, *Ferment* (Fontana/Mercury); **The Leatherwoods**, *Topeka* (Medium Cool), **Balloon**, *Gravity* (RCA); ***Simon Bonney***, (Elektra); **Paul Kelly and the Messengers**, *Comedy* (Dr. Dream); **Talk Talk**, *Laughing Stock* (Polydor).

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BY GREG BURK

My first child was born this year. Maybe it's just a coincidence that the music I liked in 1992 echoed history, improvisation and change. Probably not.

1. Ex-Philadelphian **Richard Grossman**, who lived in L.A. for the last decade-plus, played the most spontaneous possible improvised piano, and he died this year of lung cancer. (He did not smoke.) He put out a fine record this year too — *In the Air* on 9 Winds, featuring the late L.A. clarinetist John Carter. I saw him perform at Harbor College — physically weak, but it didn't affect his music. A lot of his friends performed at his memorial benefit at the Alligator Lounge in October, but my favorite thing that night was Richard Meltzer playing a tape, an improvisation, that Grossman had made for him shortly before his death; the music was all quiet apprehension and hope and the lasting quality of an artist's touch.

2. In May, on the 25th anniversary of **Billy Strayhorn**'s death, I listened again to Duke Ellington's tribute, . . . *And His Mother Called Him Bill* (Bluebird, reissued 1987), recorded three months after Strayhorn's demise. Passionate, aching music, definitive of Strayhorn's skill and range.

3. The 25th anniversary of **John Coltrane**'s death fell on July 17. I listened again to the two versions of his searching long work, *Ascension*, reissued this year on *The Major Works of John Coltrane* (Impulse!). Eleven men blowing the lid off the sky.

4. Who knew that **Miles Davis** would cut *Doo-Bop*, his most vital album since 1984, right before he died? Funk, hip-hop, unrestrained weirdness, dancin' joy.

5. **Geri Allen** put out an impressive multiminded recording (*Maroons*, on Somethin'else), and I saw the pianist twice: at CalArts (educational/fierce) and at Catalina Bar & Grill (playful/intense). A deeply serious artist who will not go away.

6. Of the Marsalis family, **Delfeayo Marsalis** has been perceived as the kid producer, a 27-year-old trombonist with a lot to prove as a musician. In the wake of a challenging debut recording, *Pontius Pilate's Decision* (Novus), he brought four other bony kids in ill-fitting suits onto the Catalina bandstand. First set: a puzzling string of standards that about anybody could have performed just as well. Second set: his originals — and he proved it.

7. **Black/Note Quartet and Quintet**: More kids in ill-fitting suits, local version.

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